

# Promoting Innovative Product Adoption via Facebook

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## Abstract

Facebook continues to dominate the social media landscape with 68% of American adults using the social networking site and – among those users – 74% accessing the site daily (Pew Research Center, 2018). Like consumers, businesses have adopted Facebook in droves. According to Facebook, Inc. (2017), more than 70 million businesses around the world use Facebook business pages each month. Given the overwhelming, generation-spanning adoption and impressive usage statistics of the social networking site, there is little question as to whether a brand should have a presence on Facebook, but many questions remain concerning how brands should manage their Facebook brand page presence for maximum return on investment.

Social network theory helps explain the power of Facebook, describing each entity (person or organization) within a network as a node connected to many other nodes by virtue of various relationships that allow information to spread (Marin & Wellman, 2010). Information shared via word of mouth (WOM) is generally considered to significantly impact consumer purchasing decisions (Richins, 1983) and positive or negative statements issued by a consumer to multiple nodes on the internet are considered electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). On Facebook, relationships allow information to spread from node to node via electronic word of mouth (eWOM). Unlike advertising, a high-control/low-credibility promotional tool, eWOM is a low-control/high-credibility tool (Solomon, 2014). While marketers have little control over what is said about their brand, consumers are more receptive to the information shared via eWOM as consumers trust credible peers more than paid sponsors.

For social media marketers, it is important to understand what types of brand page content spark eWOM in the form of sharing, which is among a set of higher-involvement, visible consumer online brand related activities (COBRAs) (Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit, 2011). These COBRAs enable a brand to leverage the consumer's relationships/credibility with other consumers as information is transmitted from node to node. This may be especially useful to marketers of innovative brands working to reduce perceived risk associated with purchase and increase rate of adoption, as WOM has a greater effect on purchasing decisions when consumers perceive higher levels of risk associated with the purchase (Still, Barnes, & Kooyman, 1984).

Looking through the lens of Rogers' (1983) diffusion of innovations research, one recognizes Facebook offers significant opportunities for innovative brands seeking to communicate product information to the many consumers who fall into the early majority and late majority categories and are, therefore, more averse to risk than innovators and early adopters. Using Facebook, an innovative brand can help consumers in the innovator and early adopter categories –who are more willing to accept the risk that comes with quickly adopting a new product – share highly credible, personal product experiences and perceptions with risk-averse peers. Further, marketers of innovative products such as meal kit subscriptions can draw upon Rogers' (1983) diffusion of innovations research to understand and promote the perceived attributes of innovations that impact rate of adoption: relative advantage, complexity, compatibility, trialability, and observability.

Marketers must also consider the impact of appeal type on consumer response to brand page posts. At the most basic level, message appeals are broken into two categories: informational/rational and transformational/emotional (Pluto & Wells, 1984; Pinto & Yagnik, 2016). Appeals are designed to influence and motivate consumers. Informational/rational appeals share factual information while transformational/emotional appeals attempt to awaken positive or negative feelings (Pluto & Wells, 1984; Leonidou & Leonidou, 2009; Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Belch & Belch, 2018). The categories are not mutually exclusive, but are exhaustive (Pluto & Wells, 1984).

The purpose of this quantitative content analysis is to explore how meal kit subscription (MKS) brands use the world's most popular social networking site to diffuse information about – and promote consumer adoption of – their services. Specifically, the research seeks to examine brand use of and consumer response to Facebook brand page posts promoting product attributes that impact rate of adoption and utilizing certain types of message appeals. Through content analysis of brand page posts issued by the top three American MKS companies (Blue Apron, Plated, and Hello Fresh) and subsequent statistical analysis, the study will attempt to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Which product attributes do MKS companies demonstrate through Facebook brand page posts?

RQ2: What types of message appeals do MKS companies use in Facebook brand page posts?

RQ3: Which brand-generated Facebook posts elicit the greatest levels of contribution (reactions, likes, shares)?

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**Keywords:** social media marketing, product adoption, message appeals, COBRAs, consumer behavior, promotions, meal kit subscription services, eWOM, innovation

#### Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:

This study will provide an initial exploration of the way marketers for meal kit subscription brands use Facebook business pages to promote product adoption and examines the relationship between appeal type, product attribute promoted, and consumer online brand-related activities (COBRAs).

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